

# Excerpt from The Childfree Life

Lauren Sandler

The decision to have a child or not is a private one, but it takes place, in America at least, in a culture that often equates womanhood with motherhood. The birthrate may have fallen, but the baby-product industry is at a record high, an estimated \$49 billion for 2013. Any national discussion about the struggle to reconcile womanhood with modernity tends to begin and end with one subject: parenting. Even Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, a book focused on encouraging women's professional development, devotes a large chunk of its take-home advice to balancing work and family, presuming that, like its author, ambitious women will have both. It's great that we're in the midst of a cultural conversation about the individual choices and structural barriers that shape our lives. But if you're a woman who's not in the mommy trenches, more often than not you're excluded from the discussion.

Being sidelined doesn't exempt childless women from being scolded. In a December column in the *New York Times* headlined MORE BABIES, PLEASE, Ross Douhat argued that the "retreat from child rearing is, at some level, a symptom of late-modern exhaustion"—an indicator of "decadence," revealing "a spirit that privileges the present over the future." The *Weekly Standard's* Jonathan V. Last has made the case in his controversial book *What to Expect When No One's Expecting* that the selfishness of the childless American is responsible for no less than the possible destruction of our economic future by reducing the number of consumers and taxpayers.

## Why Don't You Have Kids?

THE BURDEN OF JUSTIFICATION TENDS TO REST ON childless women. We rarely ask, "Why do you have kids?" Instead it's "Why don't you?" One response I've heard repeated in dozens of interviews is "I keep waiting for the biological clock to tick." Another trait childless women articulate in common is a girlhood lack of interest in dolls or playing family pretend games with friends. Some can't stand the noise of kids. But many of these women have chosen to work with kids as teachers or counselors—mothering the world, so to speak—or have close relationships with friends' and siblings' children, sometimes housing them for vacations or starting up their college funds. "I love children. I just don't need to own one" is a common refrain.

The designation for women who feel at a young age that they aren't mother material and then abide by that self-knowledge is *early adopters*. If there is a biological explanation for this impulse, or lack of one, it has yet to be discovered. Some studies of maternal instinct have shown that it clicks in once a woman gives birth, but whether our nature leads us to conceive is another matter entirely. One researcher has controversially suggested that childless women are

just smarter. At the London School of Economics, Satoshi Kanazawa has begun to present scholarship asserting that the more intelligent women are, the less likely they are to become mothers. Many peers in the field have not embraced his findings: Kanazawa analyzed the U.K.'s National Child Development Study, which followed a set of people for 50 years, and found that high intelligence correlated with early—and lifelong—adoption of childlessness. He found that among girls in the study, an increase of 15 IQ points decreased the odds of their becoming a mother by 25%. When he added controls for economics and education, the results were the same: childhood intelligence predicted childlessness.

Of course, higher IQ often leads to higher education and higher opportunity costs. It's women in that subset who are most often the ones who opt out of parenthood and who prefer to call themselves *child free*. "Childlessness is for someone who wants a child but doesn't have one. It's a lack. I'm not lacking anything," says Laura Carroll, author of *The Baby Matrix*. Laura Kipnis, a cultural critic at Northwestern University, likewise rejects defining women without kids as "less"—as if, she says, "your life isn't going to be fulfilled without it, like there's a natural absence that once you fill it with a child, the world makes sense."

A frustrated single life is how the 30% increase in childless black women from 1994 to 2008 is explained by some academics. "One potential theory is that they're refusing to fall into a stereotype" of the unmarried black mother, says Jennifer Hickey Lundquist, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who studies race and gender, adding that in her extensive studies on fertility and family formation, it's a common refrain to hear high-achieving black women mourn what they say is a dearth of similarly educated black men.

But Jena Starkes, a Web designer, says, "This doesn't have a damn thing to do with me looking for a 'good black man.'" Starkes, who shares a Manhattan apartment with her mother and a few cats, says she couldn't get through the eHarmony dating filter until she lied on her questionnaire about desiring kids. She says these days she can't really talk to her old friends, whose priorities have all shifted to the "glamorous martyrdom" of child rearing, as she calls it. Ironically, Starkes develops mommy e-commerce for a living. Motherhood, she says, is now a massive consumer base: from organic onesies and Veggie Booty to ad-heavy blogs on every aspect of maternal striving. "Before there was a mommy industry, before there was product to move, you'd never hear how it was the hardest job in the world," she says. "If it's the hardest job in the world, I'm damn happy I don't have to do it. You're not supposed to say that, but it's true."



For those who don't hold the job, there are advantages. "I get to do all sorts of things: buy an unnecessary beautiful object, plan trips with our aging parents, sleep in, spend a day without speaking to a single person, send care packages to nieces and nephews, enroll in language classes, go out for drinks with a friend on the spur of the moment," says a happily partnered woman named Jenna Johnson, a Virginian who lives in New York. "I know all of this would be possible with kids, but it would certainly be more complicated. My plans—professionally, daily, long-term, even just for vacation—are free from all the contingencies that come with children."

### Great Expectations

FEW WOMEN SPEND THEIR GIRLHOODS ASPIRING TO AN unencumbered life. Daydreams often take the form of permanent attachments: monogamous passion yielding beatific motherhood. Yet as we get older, we change along with our economic, professional, social and romantic realities. Philip Morgan, director of the Carolina Population Center, has said in numerous interviews over the years that no one wants fewer than two children. He's referring to a raft of surveys that measure women's fertility intentions, in which young women are asked simply how many children they'd like to have. (It's not a question typically asked of young men.) Of course, they're not asked about professional opportunity costs or lasting romantic love.

But those factors contribute to postponed childbearing, which Morgan says is "the real story of fertility in the past 20 years. Women put off motherhood because of work, education or the lack of a desired partner, he says, and meanwhile "they develop lifestyles they enjoy." As Joyce Abma, a social scientist at the National Center for Health Statistics, says, "The decision to have children is not an on-off switch but more like a continuum." One woman told me about reading a magazine article when she was 40 on "the four stages of adulthood": college, career, house, kids. "I thought, My God, I'm stuck forever at No. 3," she said. She waited for panic to set in, but it never did.

The opportunity costs for an American woman who gets off the career track could average as high as \$1 million in lost salary, lost promotions and so on, economist Bryan Caplan says. (Caplan, the author of the book *Selfish Reasons to Have More Children*, argues that she should go for it anyway.) Such concerns are nothing to dismiss, especially in a down economy, whether women articulate that sacrifice or not. But Kathleen Gerson, a professor of sociology at New York University whose research focuses on work, gender and family life, says postponement is far more complex than a résumé facing off against a biological clock: "It's what gives women time to build up their lives and think about how they want to live. Other commitments take the place of what motherhood might have meant." Gerson says women are living in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" social context in a country that she believes emphasizes self-sufficiency equally alongside a deep commitment to motherhood. The mix breeds impossible conflict. Without independence, we're failures. With it, we're selfish.

The rise of attachment parenting, with its immersive demands, and the sheer economic cost of raising a child—for a child born in 2011, an average of \$234,900 until age 18, according to the USDA, and \$390,000 if your household earns over \$100,000—has made motherhood a formidable prospect for some women. Sociolo-

gist Julia McQuillen sees a clear relationship between the messages we hear about motherhood and an increasing desire to opt out of it. "At a cultural level there's the constant advice given to women that you need to invest more in your kids," she says. "If we make motherhood unrealistic, why would we want to do that job?"

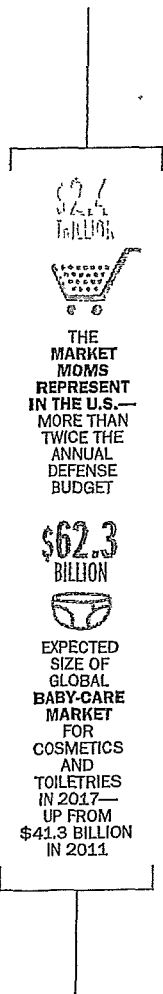
### Motherhood's Ambient Roar

FOR 15 YEARS AT FOUR DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES, DEMographer Stephanie Bohon has asked students if they intend to have children. "They all raise their hands," she says, "and then I ask why—and no one has an answer for me. That's what a social imperative does." The cultural noise about motherhood has become such a constant din that many of us don't even notice it. But ask any woman in her 30s or 40s who hasn't given birth and she'll likely tell you the ambient roar is oppressive. Products from cleaning solutions to cars are targeted at mothers. Magazines regularly offer features on the trials of parenting—TIME'S OWN ARE YOU MOM ENOUGH? cover contributed to the viral tide—and genuflect at gilded icons of celebrity motherhood, a sorority of which the Duchess of Cambridge is just the latest member. (I counted 36 images of Hollywood mothers and babies in a recent issue of *Life & Style*; tabloids have made a staple out of baby-bump watches.)

Patricia O'Laughlin, a therapist in Los Angeles who specializes in counseling women who are ambivalent about their choice, says the identity that childless women developed as little girls around the expectation of motherhood is the most painful stumbling block.

Even the decisive ones aren't immune: Leah and Paul Clouse keep a baby box in the closet with a pink tutu she once bought for an imaginary infant girl and an article on raising nerdy children that he says spoke to him. "It's indulgent of a life I have to grieve," Leah says. "If we decided to have children, we'd have to grieve the life we currently have."

Even if you are in the minority of women who don't grow up internalizing the idea that you are predestined for parenthood, the mommy drone doesn't quiet. "I resent that the entire culture of this country is obsessed with kids," Rachel Agee told me the day after her 40th birthday. "And social media is only an outlet to post pictures of your children. I've got nothing to put on Facebook. At 40, that's hard." (She has not yet bought the buzzed-about Facebook baby-blocker app to censor progeny pics, but she says she's tempted.) Agee graduated from a Southern Bible college where she was taught that to be a godly woman, one must procreate for the kingdom. "I just knew I couldn't trade my freedom for it," she says. She moved to Nashville as a hopeful performer and stopped going to church because it was so "oppressively family-centric." Nearly 30% of married households in the Nashville metropolitan area are childless, but even in the secular, artier corners of Music City, Agee wasn't greeted by a culture that supported a life without dependents. It used to be that one's urban starter kit would include a leather jacket, a guitar and a pack of cigarettes. Today that's been traded out for Lululemon maternity pants, a stroller and a pack of diapers.



Eleanore Wells, a market researcher in New York City, says that even in her mid-50s, she finds judgment at every turn. "So many women take my choice personally," she says. Recently, she told me, a woman on the subway inquired if she had children and then asked, aghast, "Who is going to take care of you when you're old?" Wells wanted to reply that nursing homes are filled with parents, but she says she just smiled, went home and packed her bags for an annual trip to Martha's Vineyard with friends. "When I was younger I found it more exhausting," she says. "Now I don't give a s--- what anyone thinks. It gets easier."

### Navigating the Choice

LAURA SCOTT RUNS THE CHILDLESS BY CHOICE documentary project, which gathers stories of people who opt out of parenthood. "To make this choice, you really have to be able to manage and navigate all assumptions that are going to be made about you," she says. "You have to be able to challenge the status quo."

"It's toughest in your late 30s and early 40s," *Going Solo* author Eric Klinenberg says. That's when social isolation tends to peak among people without kids. "What people report everywhere is this experience of watching friends just peel off into their small domestic worlds. That's the real stress point," he says, not aging and dying alone, as people fear—and strangers and family members alike tend to admonish—but the loneliness between when friends have babies and when they become empty nesters. It has hit the Clouses earlier than Klinenberg suggests, since their Southern Christian circle seems to have already disappeared into parenthood. They say their lives have become lonelier and narrower over the past few years. "You build strong relationships, and then they change. It's great for them, but it sucks for you," Clouse says. But they recently had their first "date"—roller derby—with a childless couple at their church. They say it felt like a massive relief.

As the childless numbers creep up, so do opportunities to make a full, connected life with other non-parents. The community networking site Meetup.com alone has about 20,000 members of child-free groups in about 90 metropolitan areas—one for women in suburban New Jersey, one for singles and couples in Chicago and so on. In a suburban Nashville mall one Friday evening, a child-free group gathers around a long table at Buffalo Wild Wings. Most of the 24 people here live in developments nearby, and none of them have kids. Recent activities have included zip-lining, canoeing and the monthly dinner the foodie couple in the group organizes. "We can do anything we want, so why wouldn't we?" Andrea Reynolds says, cueing a round of clinking beer glasses. The one thing they don't do much of, her husband says, is talk about "the no-kids thing" when they're together. "It's kind of the only place where we don't have to answer those questions," he says.

Deeper into the city the next night, at her 40th-birthday celebration, Rachel Agee announced, "My wish for myself at 40 is to be who I've chosen to be and not to feel like I have to defend it." Her friends, nearly all childless, applauded. ■

